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171012Z Feb 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000169

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, S/P (INBODEN), DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CG CALLS ON DISSIDENT NGUYEN DAN QUE; UPDATE ON FATHER LY

REF: A) HCMC 142 B) HCMC 160

1. (SBU) Summary: Recently amnestied democracy activist Nguyen Dan Que appeared healthy and relaxed when the CG visited him at his HCMC home on February 17. He said that over the near term he plans to maintain a low-key profile but remains committed to encouraging Vietnam's transition to democracy. He remains under police surveillance and says visitors' access may be restricted. Separately, the Bishop of the Hue (strictly protect) told us that amnestied prisoner of conscience Father Nguyen Van Ly is mentally and physically healthy and is receiving a large number of visitors at his temporary quarters on the grounds of the Bishop's residence in Hue. Although local authorities have rebuffed an initial request from the Bishop to reassign Father Ly to a parish in the diocese, the Bishop remains optimistic that he will overcome local resistance within the next three or four months. End Summary.

Call on Dr. Que

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2. (SBU) CG and PolOff called on Vietnam democracy activist Nguyen Dan Que at his home in District 5 of HCMC on February 17. A robust and smiling Que told us during the hour-long meeting that, for the time being, he will adopt a low key profile, relax and analyze changes inside Vietnam and internationally that occurred during his two years of imprisonment. He has refused a number of interview requests from foreign journalists.

3. (SBU) Que emphasized that his sabbatical will be temporary and that he remains firmly committed to pushing Vietnam's "transition from Communism to Democracy." He said he believes strongly that Vietnam's increasing international integration and its entry into rules-based structures such as the BTA and the WTO will inexorably weaken the Communist Party's hold over Vietnamese society.

4. (SBU) Que said that prison authorities treated him well, better than other prisoners in MPS Prison #5 in northern Thanh Hoa province. He was allowed to buy additional food, receive care packages and medicine regularly from his wife and even was provided a small stove in his cell. Prison authorities largely left him alone and did not subject him to "self-criticism" sessions. For news, Que was given only the official Party newspaper "Nhan Dan." In general, Que noted that prison conditions, while basic, had improved significantly compared to the previous two times he had been imprisoned. (Que observed that his cellmate, Tha Nho Den, led a peasant movement in Thanh Hoa province protesting expropriation of agricultural land. Den's five-year sentence ends in 2006.)

5. (SBU) Que said that his house and family remain under surveillance and their phone tapped. He has been able to speak with his brother in Virginia at least twice since his release from prison on February 2. He does not yet have internet at home, although he will apply for access soon. Que is not aware of any written order subjecting him to house arrest or administrative detention. However, police monitor his movements. A case in point was the family's outing during Tet to their country home. Within two hours of their departure, Que's wife was contacted by police, who protested that she did not seek prior permission to leave HCMC. While police allowed a Tet call from fellow dissident Tran Khue, Que believes they recently blocked Khue from visiting a second time.

6. (SBU) The CG handed Que family pictures that his brother had passed to us via email. Beaming at the pictures of his family, Que said that he has no plans to visit the U.S. as his place is in Vietnam to encourage its democratization. He feared that if he left Vietnam to visit the U.S., the GVN would not let him return. Que said that no other foreign diplomatic representatives had contacted him since his amnesty; the CG said that he would encourage other members of the HCMC consular corps to visit.

Status of Father Ly

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7. (SBU) Poloff on February 17 also met with Bishop of the Hue, Nguyen Nhu Thue (strictly protect) to discuss freedom of religion issues in his bishopric (septel) and to review the status of Father Nguyen Van Ly. (Bishop Thue was in HCMC to attend a February 15 intra-faith HIV/AIDS prayer service - ref B.) The

Bishop told us that Father Ly is in good health and is residing at the Bishop's residence in Hue. (Ly was serving in the Hue archdiocese prior to his arrest in 2001.) He is receiving a large number of visitors from throughout the diocese, including quite a number of other priests. The Bishop said that Ly remains under formal administrative detention and must seek prior police permission if he wishes to travel outside the city of Hue.

18. (SBU) The Bishop already had contacted local authorities to request permission for Ly to be reassigned a parish, but was told that his administrative detention precluded his reassignment. (On October 19, 2001, the Thua Thien Hue Provincial People's Court sentenced Father Ly to 15 years in prison for "damaging the Government's unity policy," and five years of administrative probation upon release from prison.) Despite the formal five-year administrative detention order from the courts, the Bishop was confident that authorities would ease their objections and allow Ly to return to work as a priest within the next three or four months.

19. (SBU) The Bishop said that Ly is physically and mentally fit. In his meetings with other priests, Ly reportedly has told them that he holds no grudge against his captors and is optimistic about the future. The Bishop said that he would facilitate our meeting with Father Ly when we next visit Hue.

WINNICK